ARMENIAWEEK
YOUR CONNECTION TO TODAY'S ARMENIA

The Komitas Code: Discovery unlocks the secrets of ancient music

By Mher Navoyan
ArmeniaWeek correspondent

A long-lost "key" to understanding thousands of pieces of medieval Armenian music has been rediscovered.

The notes on musical notation, or *khazer*, were drawn up by the composer Komitas but then lost for nearly a century.

Arthur Shahnazarian (pictured bottom), a Yerevan composer, came across the work while studying Komitas' papers.

The *khazer*, which were in use between the Ninth and 15th Centuries, are different from traditional European musical notation. Whereas the notation in modern scores uses one sign for each sound, a single *khazer* note can express several sounds at once.

The meaning of the notes was shrouded in mystery, even among musicians of the time. Information about them was kept secret and very few musicians mastered them.

After the 16th Century, the wars and invasions that Armenia suffered made it impossible to educate new specialists in the musical system. The number of people who understood the notes gradually declined over time and eventually the knowledge was lost.

Komitas devoted 20 years to trying to understand the music and by the beginning of the 20th Century he had cracked the code. But he was arrested in Turkey in 1915 during the Armenian Genocide and later deported.

With the support of European intellectuals, he was brought back to Istanbul from exile in the Syrian desert. But Komitas's experiences during his expulsion had left him mentally disturbed and he was unable to publish his discovery - his notes were never heard of again.

Shahnazarian wondered if the composer's notes might not be in his archive and began to research them in 1984. Miraculously, he began to find clues.

"I was very surprised to find not only the "very keys" (by Komitas's words), but also the analysis of the *khazer* and even the decoding of Armenian medieval church music written with those notes," says Shahnazarian.

He was able to decipher the keys with the help of fragments of Komitas' research plus related manuscripts that provided details of the meaning of the musical notation. Now Shahnazarian is publishing a book on his discoveries.

They open up a whole new world of old Armenian liturgical music. In Yerevan's Matenadaran manuscript museum alone, there are preserved more than 290 Pataragamatuyts, about 300 Zhamagirk, 350 Sharaknots, and numerous Tagharanner, Gandzaranner, and "Manrusman - all ritual works written in *khazer*.

Similar manuscripts are preserved in Jerusalem, Venice, Vienna, and other centers of Armenian culture. It will be possible to read

thousands of medieval spiritual songs as a result of the re-discovery of Komitas's research - expanding our understanding of Armenian medieval music.

And not only Armenian music. The finding is also expected to provide insights into Byzantine, Georgian, and Slavonic music from the period, written in similar notation forms that have been only partly decoded.

Shahnazarian emphasises that Komitas deserve the credit for the work - he simply found and interpreted composer's research.

"Those valuable manuscripts exist and so now it is possible to read national church songs," he says.

Photos by Karen Minasian

©Copyright ArmeniaWeek March 15, 2002. all rights reserved. WWW.ARMENIAWEEK.COM is published by the FOURTH MILLENNIUM SOCIETY, publishers of ARMENIAN INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE. Articles may not be published without prior consent.

[<== Previous Story] [To Home page] [E-Mail Your*Comments!*] [To story index page] [Next Story ==>]